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Sweet nothings: why there's always room for dessert

Even if you're full, your brain can be susceptible to sugar cravings, says Sam Rice

The Daily Telegraph · 21 Apr 2025 · 7

Have you ever asked yourself why it is that when the dessert menu arrives, somehow, you always seem to have space? Well, researchers might have the answer. The team at the Max Planck Institute for Biology of Ageing found that the same nerve cells that make us feel full after a meal are also responsible for our sweet cravings afterwards.

Dr Fabien Naneix, a neuroscientist from the Rowett Institute at the University of Aberdeen and an expert on how sugar affects the brain, explains that in this study researchers found "a subset of neurons located in a very deep part of the brain called the hypothalamus, which usually signal for us to stop eating after a meal. These were actually driving sugar consumption in mice, even when they were full." Using brain imaging, they found similar results in humans.

The study has interesting implications for how we approach the very real issue of sugar overconsumption, which is one of the main drivers of conditions such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

"What we choose to eat is controlled by our brain. But not all foods are equally 'rewarding' for the brain," says Dr Naneix. "Knowing that craving sugary foods and hunger levels are not necessarily correlated – and that these same brain circuits are involved in other processes like emotion, mood and motivation – can help us manage our cravings better."

Here are five ways to work with your body if you want to dial down that sweet tooth – or satisfy it in a healthier way.

Fill up on fibre

Laura Clark, a dietitian, advises increasing fibre in the diet to prevent blood sugar spikes, which drive sugar cravings. Recent research has also found that eating prebiotic fibre, found in foods such as onions, garlic, asparagus and apples, causes changes in the gut bacteria that directly affect the brain, making you less likely to crave sugary foods. Switch to wholegrain bread, rice and pasta and leave the skins on potatoes for an immediate fibre boost.

Ensure there's a good helping of healthy fats and protein in your meal

They make you feel more satisfied and less likely to reach for something sweet after a meal. Healthy fats, in the form of full-fat dairy, nuts, avocados and olive oil, and protein in nuts, eggs, fish and beans, are important in determining how satisfied you feel, so try to include them in every meal. For example, at breakfast, toast with jam provides little protein and healthy fat and won't fill you up; choose toast with avocado and scrambled egg instead.

Go for whole foods to reduce sugary cravings

Such is the addictive nature of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) that food manufacturers have a term for the precise combination of sugar, salt and fat levels that maximise the consumer's desire to keep eating by triggering the brain's pleasure centres; it's known as "the bliss point". Reducing UPFs is, therefore, key to reducing cravings. Focus on simple meals with whole

ingredients. If you do buy packaged foods, check the list of ingredients and try to avoid those with additives.

Pay attention to what you’re eating

Clark is keen to point out that often the desire for sweet food comes from the need to be soothed, particularly when we are stressed, and giving in to this craving can be accompanied by feelings of shame. Try eating mindfully: we often eat a sugary snack because we are not tuned into our body’s hunger signals. So before reaching for that biscuit, ask yourself the following questions. How hungry am I on a scale of one to 10? If it’s less than eight, you’re not really hungry. Am I just bored or in need of a break? Perhaps have a cup of tea instead. Can I ride this out until the next meal?

If you’re going to have dessert, enjoy it

If you are going to eat dessert, Clark advises choosing smaller portions but ramping up the comfort in which you eat them, i.e. don’t stand guiltily by the fridge. Use a plate, sit down and enjoy your snack. You can make more nutritious sweet treats too. Have a square of dark chocolate with a teaspoon of nut butter to satisfy your sweet tooth in a more sustaining way.